International Society for the History and Bibliography of Herpetology

Bibliotheca Herpetologica

What an old postcard can show: unique image of an extinct species of *Boa* most likely present on Martinique until the early 20th century

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Five currently recognized extant species of Boa Constrictors (*Boa sigma* of the Pacific Coast, the isthmian species *B. imperator*, the South American species *B. constrictor*, and the insular Caribbean species *B. orophias* and *B. nebulosa*) occupy a wide range of habitats over 64 degrees of latitude (*B. sigma* at 30°N and *B. constrictor occidentalis* at about 34°S) (Reynolds et al., 2023; Reynolds and Henderson, 2026). These snakes have considerable potential for local evolution, with populations isolated on islands often evolving small body sizes that most likely are adaptations to food scarcity (Card et al., 2016). Although two of the five extant species are endemic to the Lesser Antilles (Reynolds et al., 2023; Reynolds and Henderson, 2026) no consensus exists regarding the total number of species that have occurred in the region.

The *Boa constrictor* complex in the West Indies

Boa nebulosa Lazell, 1964, the Dominica Boa (Fig. 1), was described as *Constrictor constrictor nebulosus* by Lazell (1964). First recognized as a distinct species by Bonny (2007), recent genetic studies (e.g., Thorpe and Malhotra, 2023) and its geographic isolation have validated its recognition as a distinct lineage in the *B. constrictor* complex endemic to Dominica. This species colonized Dominica during the Late Miocene or Pliocene from South America (Thorpe and Malhotra, 2023). Barré et al. (1997) found a *B. nebulosa* under a tree on Petite-Terre (Guadeloupe), but it was a snake from Dominica that had been released (a not uncommon practice that still happens); it was returned to Dominica and no other individuals were found.

Boa orophias Linnaeus, 1758, the Saint Lucia Boa (Fig. 2), originally described as a species, was later assigned to *Constrictor constrictor orophias*, initially by Amaral (1929), before being re-elevated to species status by Bonny (2007). A recent molecular phylogeny (Thorpe and Malhotra, 2023) validated its status as a Saint Lucian endemic. Like *B. nebulosa*, this species colonized Saint Lucia during the Late Miocene or Pliocene from South America (Thorpe and Malhotra, 2023).

In addition to the two extant Lesser Antillean species, Reynolds et al. (2023) recognized five additional species: *Boa blanchardensis* on Marie-Galante, *Boa* sp. on Basse-Terre of Guadeloupe, *Boa* sp. on Martinique, *Boa* sp. on La Désirade, and *Boa* sp. on Antigua, all almost certainly extinct (Fig. 3). Only *B. blanchardensis* Bochaton and Bailon, 2018 has been formally described based on Pleistocene subfossil material found in three different deposits (the first of which was Blanchard Cave) (Bochaton et al., 2015, 2021b; Bochaton and Bailon, 2018). This small species (Bochaton et al., 2021b), absent from all Holocene subfossil assemblages on Marie-Galante, is estimated to have become extinct at the end of the Pleistocene. This might be related to a decline in prey availability linked to a catastrophic event (e.g., drought, hurricane, volcanic activity), an event that could have a very localized impact, as it affected only the boas in the Marie-Galante herpetofaunal assemblage and not the boas of the surrounding islands (Bochaton and Bailon, 2018).

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Fig. 1. *Boa nebulosa*. Photo R. Powell.

Boas on Antigua, the Guadeloupe Bank, and Martinique appear to have existed at least until Amerindian times (Steadman et al., 1984; Bochaton et al., 2021b). However, while the fossil and subfossil records of *Boa* spp. in the Lesser Antilles provide evidence of their presence, they permit no indication of the time when the species disappeared from the extant fauna.

One piece of archaeological pre-Columbian ornamental "beads" fashioned from a vertebra of *Boa* sp. was found on Basse-Terre (Fig. 4A) and another was found in a Late Holocene natural deposit on La Désirade (Guadeloupe Archipelago). Those bones could be conspecific with *B. blanchardensis* or *B. nebulosa* but the material was insufficient for assigning it to a species (Bochaton, 2022a; Bochaton et al., 2021b). The occurrence of *Boa* on Antigua, dated to 1915 BP, was based on subfossil material from two archaeological sites assigned to the genus *Boa* without a formal taxonomic description (Indian Creek; Steadman et al., 1984) and based on a worn vertebra after elimination of other possible lineages (Burma Quarry; Pregill et al., 1988). That species was designated *Boa* sp. 1 by Lescure et al. (2020).

The species on Martinique, designated *Boa* sp. 2 by Lescure et al. (2020), has a longer history. It was first described by l'Anonyme de Carpentras (1618–1620; ed. 1994) but without an indication of an island name. Père Labat (1722, 1724), the first to reliably mention boas in 1699 in the vicinity of Macouba, provided support for the assertion by Benito-Espinal (1978, 1990) that boas occurred on the island before the introduction of the mongoose in the latter half of the 19th century (Breuil 2002). More recent authors (Lescure, 2001; Lorvelec et al., 2007; Breuil, 2009; Dewynter et al., 2019; Reynolds et al., 2023) have included a recently (19th century) extinct *Boa* on species lists from Martinique. The observation was traced to Anse Couleuvre, but no formal description exists at this time. Pre-Columbian beads fashioned from *Boa* vertebrae from Dizac Beach (Fig.

4B) were reported by Bochaton (2022a), which could suggest either the historical presence of the species or arrival on Martinique via Amerindian inter-island trade.

Although Steadman et al. (1984) suggested that boas were intentionally carried by humans from other Caribbean islands to Antigua and Guadeloupe and that their arrival was recent and not natural, and Lescure (1983) did not believe in the occurrence of the genus *Boa* on Guadeloupe, Benito-Espinal (1990) suggested that boas were present on Guadeloupe and Martinique during early European colonization but that they disappeared after the introduction of the mongoose between 1880 and 1885 or 1888. Breuil (2002) considered the genus *Boa* present but extirpated in the French West Indies, including Guadeloupe, noting (p. 38) that in addition to the disappearance of an ameiva (*Pholidoscelis major*), the roquet (*Leiocephalus herminieri*), and probably a *Diploglossus sensu lato*, the Boa Constrictor and the Antillean Toad (*Leptodactylus fallax*) might also be missing, as they were known to have been present on Martinique. However, Breuil (2009) stated that Saint Lucia is inhabited by the mongoose and the naturally occurring Manicou (*Didelphis marsupialis*), yet *Boa orophias* is still present; consequently, these mammals are unlikely to have caused the extinction of the boa on Martinique. The extinction of a distinct species of *Boa* on Martinique almost certainly occurred after Amerindian colonization (Dewynter et al., 2019). Lorvelec et al. (2007) regarded its extinction as occurring after 1796. The hypothesis that the boa became extinct as a consequence of hunting for bush meat was considered unlikely because of a widely held belief that Amerindians do not kill snakes (Breuil, 2002). This, however, was proven wrong by the rich archaeological record of snakes in the Lesser Antilles (Bochaton et al., 2019; Bochaton, 2022b). Despite these apparent contradictions, the discovery of boid fossil vertebrae on Grande-Terre and La Désirade (Guadeloupe) leaves no doubt about the occurrence of these snakes on those islands. We agree with Breuil (2002) and recognize the ancient presence of *Boa* sp. on the Guadeloupe Archipelago based on biogeographical and historical evidence. However, that such an occurrence was never mentioned by ancient chroniclers (Jean-Baptiste Thibault de Chanvalon (1723–1788), Auguste Plée (1786–1825), and Moreau de Jonnès (1778–1870)), despite the large size of these snakes, is puzzling.

The Henri Cunge Postcard

While searching online for illustrations for a conference on snake charmers, one of us (MH) found a postcard from the very early 20th century illustrating a man holding a Boa Constrictor in Martinique. We herein discuss the significance of that postcard for the occurrence and extinction date of *Boa* sp. on Martinique, which, according to Reynolds et al. (2023), was regarded as absent since at least the 19th century.

The postcard was first detected on the web as part of the Grenville Collins Postcards Collection. One of us (II) also has an original of the postcard in his personal collection (Fig. 5). It illustrates a man holding a dead snake tied to a stick. The snake, with the typical coloration of a species in the *Boa constrictor* complex and a total length estimated to have been about 2 m, was certainly an adult and most likely a female (KB, pers. obs.). The front of the postcard is labeled "Charmeur de Serpents" (= snake charmer) and is annotated "Cunge, photographe, Fort-de-France," which corresponds to Fort-de-France, Martinique. "Cunge" is the name of the photographer, Henri Cunge, a professional photographer based in Fort-de-France. The photograph likely was taken in that city and, according to the décor in the background, in the photographer's studio and not in the field. In addition to his work as a portrait painter, Cunge specialized in coastal views of Fort-de-France. He also published postcards, most of which were dated between 1900 and 1905. The back of our postcard has no date indicated, but this was generally the case for such postcards, although, if the postcard was sent to someone, a postmark might be visible. Between 1901 and 1907 postcards were mostly undivided and only the destination address was visible on the back. The majority of photographs taken by Cunge were around 1902. However, the postcard that one of us (II) possesses has its back divided, one left half for correspondence and the right half for the postal address (Fig. 6), suggesting a date after 1907. On our postcard the text covered both parts and indicated among others "meilleurs voeux pour 1924" (best wishes for 1924),

Fig. 2. *Boa orophias*. Photo Jennifer Daltry, Fauna & Flora International and Re:wild.

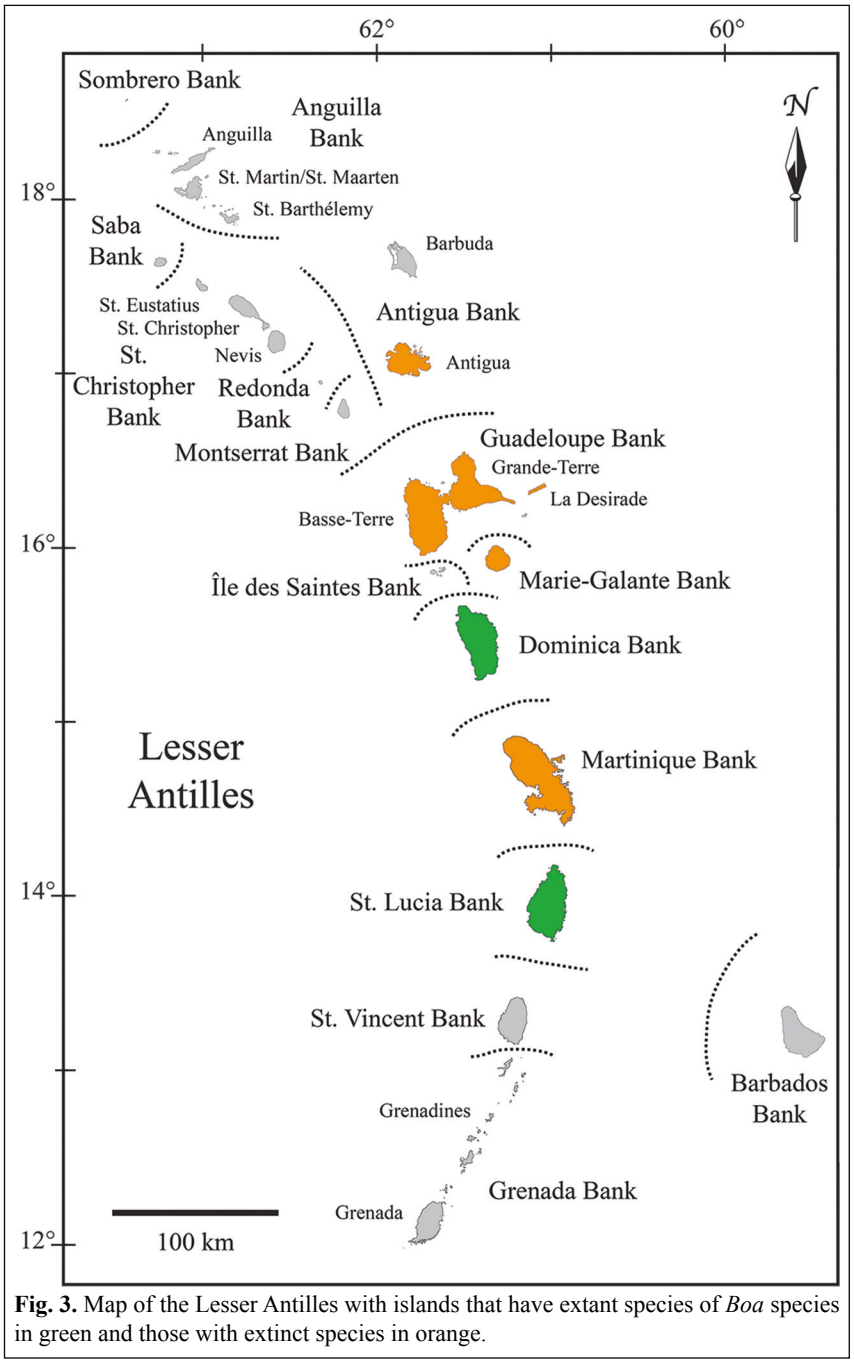

Fig. 3. Map of the Lesser Antilles with islands that have extant species of *Boa* species in green and those with extinct species in orange.

that date and the divided back of the postcard could indicate the picture was made in the 1920s by Henri Cunge.

Discussion

Although we cannot determine the origin of the snake illustrated on the postcard, if it had been alive, one would think that it could have been of foreign origin. However, since it was dead, it likely came from Martinique, probably from the vicinity of Fort-de-France (that the snake came from a neighboring island and was brought back dead to Martinique for the photograph is unlikely). As the animal is bound in the photograph, it almost certainly was killed in the field. Bounties were offered for dead Martinique Lanceheads (*Bothrops lanceolatus*), and Breuil (2009) suggested that Martinique Boas could have been exterminated because they were mistaken for lanceheads or because these snakes killed poultry. As *Bothrops lanceolatus* is an efficient predator of rats and mice in sugar cane fields, the idea that a *Boa* was introduced for that reason by humans in the past centuries is unlikely. Also, such an introduction would have been documented in administrative registers at that time. This postcard seems to support the contention of Breuil (2009) that boas on Martinique were killed for a bounty. The slaughter of snakes in Martinique spanned several centuries (Rufz, 1843 [1845]), with 12,000 snakes killed as recently as 1970, but only 386 in 2002 (Gros-Désormeaux et al., 2017). Breuil (2009) reported that some Boa Constrictors recently found in Martinique were waifs or escaped pets. That this was the case at the time the postcard was made, however, is unlikely, as pet reptiles were very rare at that time. Also the pattern of the illustrated snake is distinct from all other known populations.

The caption describing a "snake charmer" on our postcard (Fig. 5) is obviously wrong because snake charmers did not exist in the French West Indies, where the local population was and remains very fearful of these reptiles due to *Bothrops lanceolatus* regularly killing islanders. Martinicans were eager to kill snakes but certainly did not want to handle them. Thus the image on the postcard (Fig. 5) was clearly a snake hunter who likely killed the snake for financial reasons, and the snake tied to the stick almost certainly was a wild animal killed by the collector who was photographed by Cunge with his catch. Such confusion between snake hunters and snake charmers is again obvious in several other postcards that most likely originated from the same period and which illustrate an individual labeled as a snake charmer who killed a *B. lanceolatus* for bounties in the same area (Fig. 7). There are a number of versions of this postcard, and some of them say "Chasseur des Serpents" ("Snake Catcher") and not "Charmeur des Serpents" ("Snake Charmer"). On one version dated 1901 via postmark, the man is a snake charmer; in another dated 1909 via postmark he has become a snake catcher. He is also a catcher in another undated version of the same image. Note that these postcards were not produced by Henri Cunge, but by Leboullanger ("éditeur"), "Cliché Fabre," in Fort de France. The Leboullanger family were

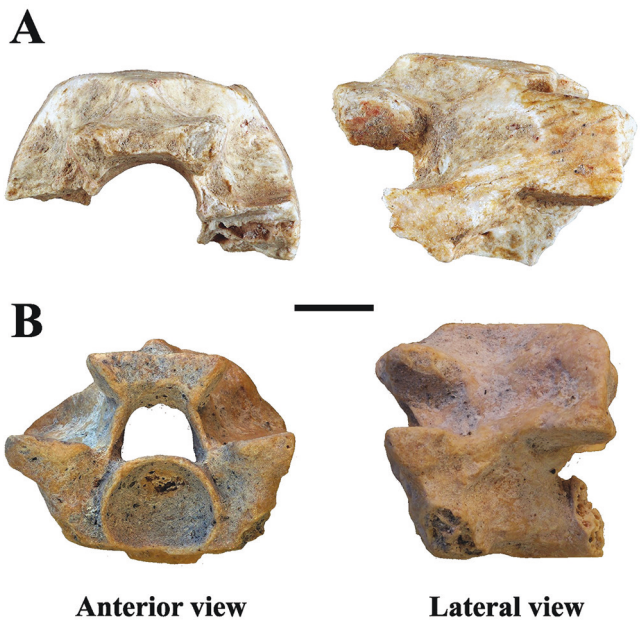

Fig. 4. (A) The *Boa* vertebral fragment recovered from the Basse-Terre Cathedral site. (B) One of the seven *Boa* vertebrae recovered from the site of Dizac Beach on Martinique (**Fig.** modified from Bochaton, 2022a). Scale bar = 3 mm.

important merchants in Martinique at that time. Another version of the same postcard was actually published in Paris.

Specific identification of the *Boa* illustrated on the postcard (Fig. 5) is difficult if not impossible, particularly since its dorsum is not shown and only about a third of the right side and a portion of the tail are visible. The pattern that is evident, including the lateral rhombic-shaped elements, does not correspond to *Boa nebulosa* or *B. orophias* but it could be that of an undescribed endemic Martinican species (Fig. 8).

Boa orophias shows lateral marks that are unique within the genus *Boa*. These are rarely rhombic but are instead irregular and often rectangular in shape. Those rectangles are typically very narrow, vertically elongated, and are close together along the flanks (Fig. 8D). *Boa nebulosa* (Fig. 8C) bears mostly irregular, often rounded blotches rather than a lateral pattern consisting of either rhombs or rectangles. These blotches often are connected with the saddle-shaped dorsal patches. The snake illustrated on the Martinique postcard has the clearly demarcated typical rhombic (or diamond-shaped) pattern of *Boa constrictor* (Fig. 8B), with few or any intervening pattern elements. On that basis, one could argue that the postcard Boa is *B. constrictor*, but examination of the tail (far left in Fig. 5) reveals an increasingly darker ground color without any evident pattern that is more-or-less common to all adult specimens. This combination (increasingly darker tail and lack of pattern) differs definitively from *B. constrictor*, although the possibility exists that this could be an artifact of the old photograph or represents an unusual pattern variation. In addition to the lateral marks, the photograph also indicates that the head of the Martinique Boa is quite compressed

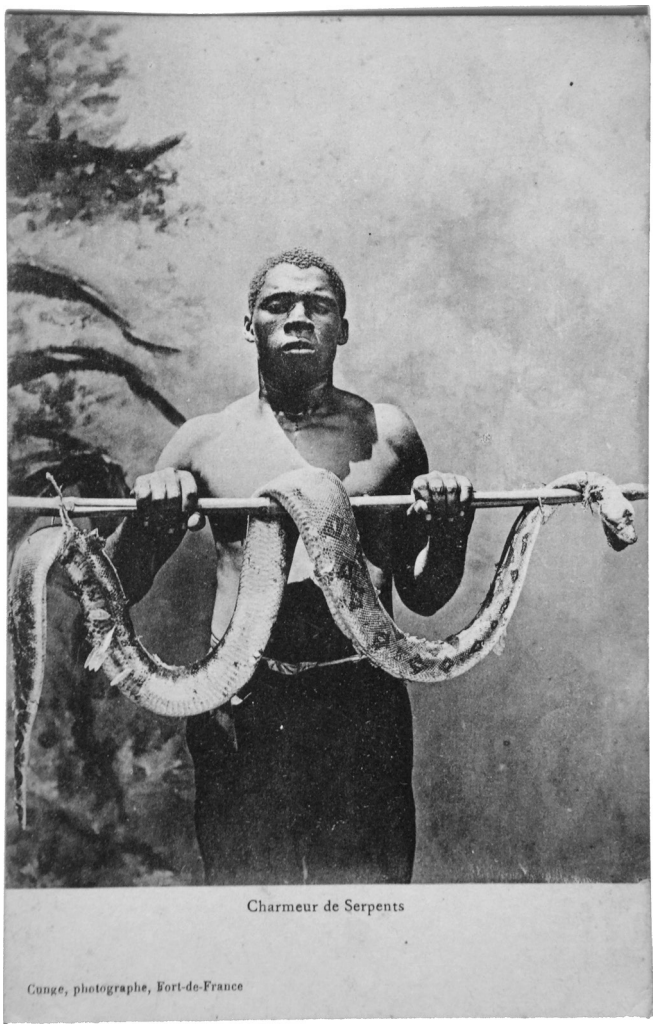

Fig. 5. An image of a postcard from early 20th century, with a photograph by Henri Cunge illustrating a "snake charmer" who likely caught and killed the snake. Based on size and pattern, it was obviously a species in the *Boa constrictor* complex and might well have been the last recorded individual of a species endemic on Martinique that is now extinct (I. Ineich, pers. coll.).

and more rounded than the elongated and tapered head of *B. orophias* (and to some extent *B. nebulosa*). However, we cannot exclude the possibility that the head was damaged during capture. Nevertheless, the tail color and pattern do not match that of any *Boa* from the Guyanas, although at least the first six to seven lateral pattern elements resemble those of *B. constrictor* or *B. imperator*. However, taken collectively, these observations suggest that the *Boa* illustrated on the postcard is unlikely to have been a known continental species and is virtually impossible to have been a known Lesser Antillean species (KB, pers. obs.).

The three islands with known endemic boas (Fig. 3) are not far from Martinique; Marie-Galante is located 195 km north, Dominica 52 km north, and Saint Lucia 33 km south of Martinique. Since the occurrence of an endemic species on Martinique cannot be ruled out, the snake illustrated on the postcard could be the only available illustration of a species

CARTE POSTALE
La Correspondance au recto n'est pas acceptée par tous les Pays Étrangers. (Se renseigner à la Poste.)
CORRESPONDANCE
ADRESSE

Fig. 6. Divided back of the postcard of Fig. 5 above. The text indicate that the postcard was sent in 1923. The postcard was mailed in an envelope as the whole back is occupied by the text of the sender without any address (I. Ineich, pers. coll.).

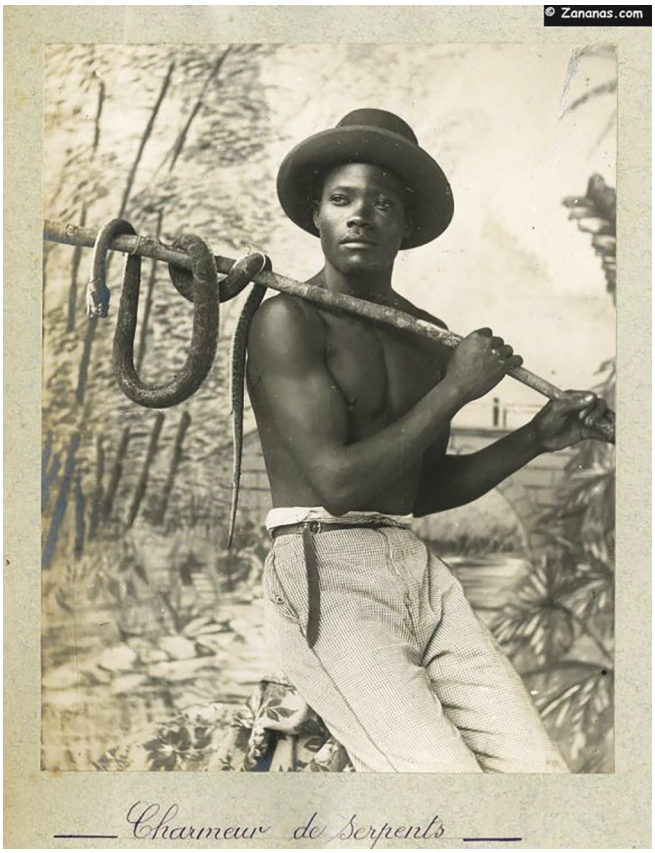

Fig. 7. A snake hunter holding a *Bothrops lanceolatus* on a stick in Martinique. That picture is not from Cunge but certainly dates to about the same time as his photograph of the Boa Constrictor from Martinique. Note also the similarity of the legend with Cunge's postcard erroneously calling the snake hunter a "snake charmer."

otherwise known only from unidentifiable subfossil remains.

If in fact this postcard illustrates an endemic Martinican species, it would extend into the early 20th century the occurrence of boas on Martinique. Unfortunately, details of the illustrated snake are lacking, rendering it impossible to determine with certainty whether it was a Martinican species or a population (or individual) that arrived naturally or with human mediation from a neighboring island. Two alternative hypotheses cannot be rejected: (1) based on prevailing currents, the snake could have originated naturally from St. Lucia, however, this origin is unlikely, as it lacks the characteristic pattern of the endemic Saint Lucian species; and (2) human-mediated transport and release of the snake from another island or from continental South or Central America. However, that snake hunters collected snakes on other islands and took them to Martinique to collect bounties is unlikely, although inter-island travel was not uncommon in the early 20th century. As for the origin of some boas observed in Martinique, Michel Breuil (pers. comm., June 2026) noted that there were still mongoose fights against endemic *Bothrops*, but when the organizers had trouble finding snakes for these fights, they went to St. Lucia to get boas, which they kept in captivity in Martinique.

According to Breuil (2009), that early field collectors and naturalists did not find boas on Martinique suggests that the extinction of the Martinique Boa occurred long ago. However, Lescure et al. (2020) reported a MNHN specimen (MNHN-RA 3158) labeled as having originated at "Sainte Luce" (a locality in Martinique) and not "Sainte Lucie" (Saint Lucia). Sainte Luce is in southern Martinique, facing Saint Lucia. Although thought to have been an error, the museum catalogue clearly lists "Martinique." One of us (KB) carefully examined that specimen in December 2007 and concluded that it is *B. orophias*, which does not preclude it from having been captured in Martinique (Fig. 9).

Important to note is that the absence of any historical accounts of *Boa* on Martinique after early 18th century, despite its potential occurrence there, is not unique. Indeed, in Guadeloupe, the recent discovery of a 19th century museum specimen of an endemic species of *Leiocephalus* contrasts with the absence of the genus from historical records after the 17th century (Bochaton et al., 2021a).

Thorpe and Malhotra (2023) indicated that the reciprocal monophyly of Dominican and St. Lucian Boas represented a single colonization and subsequent divergence for at least the two species on those islands, with the source likely being *B. constrictor* from South America. They also noted that this situation is quite similar to that of Lesser Antillean Lanceheads (*Bothrops lanceolatus* on Martinique and *B. caribbaeus* on St. Lucia), with two extant, reciprocally

Fig. 8. Dorsolateral patterns of (A) the Martinique *Boa* illustrated on the postcard, (B) *Boa constrictor*, (C) *Boa nebulosa*, and (D) *Boa orophias*. Photos B–D, Klaus Bonny.

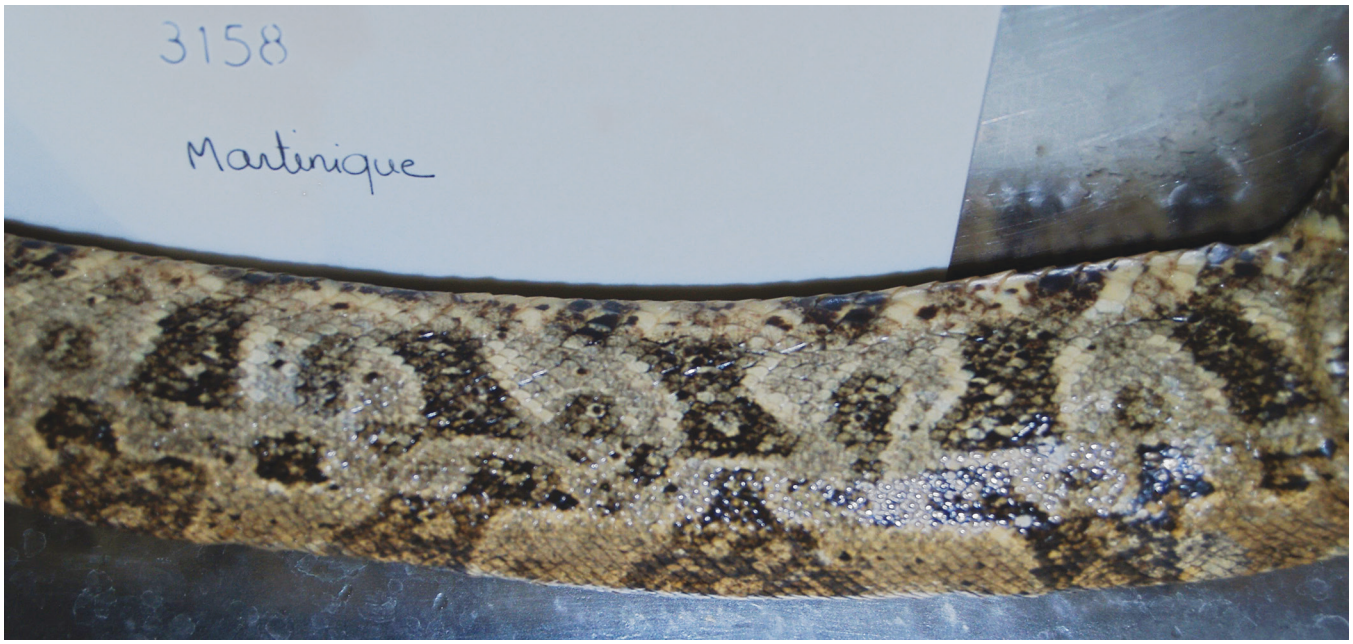

Fig. 9. *Boa orophias* (MNHN-RA 3158) with a doubtful locality that could be St. Lucie Island (Saint Lucia), where *B. orophias* is endemic, or Sainte Luce in Martinique, where a human-mediated introduction or naturally colonizing individual could have been collected. Photo Klaus Bonny

monophyletic species with their closest relatives in northern South America. Martinique is positioned between Dominica (*B. nebulosa*) and St. Lucia (*B. orophias*). Its recently extinct *Boa* is therefore most likely part of the same radiation, given that the other extinct and fossil species of *Boa* in the Lesser Antilles are all distributed continuously on centrally located islands of the Antillean Arc (Antigua to St. Lucia but excluding Montserrat and Les Saintes).

Nevertheless, although no rigorous scientific evaluation on the taxonomic identification of the snake figured in the postcard could be conducted, we consider it very likely to be an unnamed endemic Martinican species in the *Boa constrictor* complex that did not become extinct until the first quarter of 20th century.

Acknowledgments

We thank R. Graham Reynolds and Jean-Christophe de Massary for help with references, Renaud Boistel for the layout of Fig. 8, and Michel Breuil and C. Kenneth Dodd for their comments.

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We suggest the following format for citing this article:
Ineich, I., R. Powell, K. Bonny, M. Holden, and C. Bochaton. 2026. What an old postcard can show: unique image of an extinct species of *Boa* most likely present on Martinique until the early 20th century. *Bibliotheca Herpetologica* 20(6):61–69.